GOLDEN WEDDING [1]

by RUTH SUCKOW

I

RUTH SUCKOW was born in Iowa in 1892. She was educated in Grinnell College and at Boston. For a short time she taught in the University of Denver but soon returned to Iowa, where she had an apiary at Earlville. She stands with Willa Cather as a sympathetic interpreter of the Middle West to the rest of America. From Miss Suckow's stories one can discover the character of life in the little villages and farms west of the Mississippi, for her work is an excellent honest portrayal of the people and times she has known. She has written *Country People, The Bonney Family,* novels; and *Iowa Interiors,* short stories.

"You ought to change your clothes, pa."

"What you in such a hurry to get my clothes changed for?"

"Well, you want to be ready when George comes in, don't you?"

"Aw, he won't get in today. How can he get the car through all this snow?"

"He will, too. Didn't they invite us out there?"

"Yeah, but they didn't know it was goin' tuh snow like this."

"You go now and put your other clothes on."

He grumbled, but finally obeyed—which was just like him.

Yes, but why did he always have to act this way? He had been doing it ever since they were married. He went through just so much grumbling first before he would do

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anything that he knew he must. It was the same thing over again every time they went anywhere; and all her prodding hadn't done any good that she could see.

"Won't get in today." That was just like him, too. If he knew that she was counting on anything, he had to hold out and belittle it, raise objections. He never wanted to admit that anything was going to turn out right. He always had good arguments to oppose to her faith, which he declared didn't take any account of the facts. But she still held to this blind faith of hers, and he to his objections. Sometimes things worked out her way; sometimes his. She pulling ahead, he pulling back. But the pulling had amounted to this much in fifty years—that he usually gave in in the end; and that she was a little worried in spite of her hopeful assertions that things were going to justify her belief.

So that now she did have to admit to herself that it was snowing hard. She was sure that George would come . . . but her eyes screwed up anxiously as she looked out over the plants at air thick with misty flakes. It looked as if it wasn't going to stop all day. The covered plants and peony-bushes just outside were big clumps of whiteness. Fine dark twigs stuck out from the snow humped over the bending raspberry-bushes. When she peered down the street, she could barely see the willow-trees at the farther end, bluish and dim. Few passers-by came down this little side street where the old Willeys lived. The glimmery softness of the white road showed only two crooked tracks from a morning milk-wagon that were already nearly filled, and as white as all the rest of the world.

Just the same, she believed that George was going to get in somehow.

Mr. Willey came back into the room.

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She looked up sharply, and cried in despair: "Oh, pa, why did you have to go put on that old necktie?"

"What old necktie?"

"Oh, you know what I mean! That old thing that I should think you'd be ashamed to wear around the place any more, let alone where we're going today. Go and put on your nice one—the one Jenny sent you for Christmas."

"Whatta I wanta put that on fur! To ride out in the snow?"

"Snow!" she scoffed. "How's the snow going to hurt it? Can't you cover it up? Now you go and put that on. Try and look decent for once, today. You don't know who may be there to see us."

"Yes, you keep talkin' about that. Who do you think's goin' to be there?"

"Well, pa, you know the dinner's for us."

"Oh, I guess they ain't such a whole grist of folks comin' out in all this snow jest to eat dinner with *us*."

"You go and put that other tie on."

He went. But her small frail hands, bluish and veined, shook a little at the crocheting with which she was trying to fill in the time. Her eyes moistened, and her mouth tightened into a childish grimace of weeping. Why did pa have to be so mean—and just today? They knew each other with such terrible intimacy that each had an uncanny perception of just what tiny things could hurt the other. Pretending this dinner wasn't going to amount to anything; depreciating her proud glory as a bride of fifty years; bringing up the sense of all the intimate, dingy happenings to tarnish the splendor of this occasion. Putting on that old tie today was a blow at her importance as his wife, at their marriage. He was always insisting upon their age and insignificance . . . and the silent,

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ghost-white street, the meagerness of their little yard with the few bushes, the bleak lines of the storm entry, those half-filled wheel tracks—all bore him out. Two old people, out of things, living in a little house off the main road. Denying the significance of their one achievement of continuity.

It made her bitter, too. What did it amount to that they had been married fifty years? Pa was so mean. Sentimental thoughts with which she had begun the day—unconsciously framing themselves in her mind in the grandiloquent terms of the town paper—were stringently checked by the terrible familiarity of his attitude. Just then, she didn't see why she *had* been such a fool as to have lived with him fifty years—why any one should celebrate it.

Oh, well—but then, that was pa. After all, she knew how much the grumbling amounted to. Why did she let herself be so riled by it every time? Her best dress of dark-gray silk, shimmering so nicely in the light from the window, raised the occasion, would not let her feel harsh. She knew that all those objections were partly a defense against the ill fortune of which they had had enough—he was not going to admit that things might turn out well, so that he wouldn't be disappointed again. He had had to make an assertion with that old tie to conceal a sneaking hope that this dinner might be a big affair, with people met to celebrate. Their long years together stretched out before her inner vision . . . He'd been a pretty good husband after all, had worked hard, hadn't spent his money for drink or run after other women. She supposed you couldn't have everything.

She cried excitedly: "Pa! Here comes George! Now you hurry up and get yourself ready."

But she was the one, after all, who had to scurry to the

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dresser for a last hairpin to stick into her neat little knob of hair, to refasten her brooch in her lace collar, search for another handkerchief. He was ready, tie and all, and she was still in the bedroom when George, their son-in-law, came stamping in, scuffing the thick soft snow off his big overshoes.

"Ain't you ready, folks?"

"Ma! Hurry up! Well, what in thunder's she doing? Thought she was ready an hour ago."

II

"I didn't know as you'd get here, George."

"Yep—oh, there's lots of ways of gettin' in."

"The old bobs still come in pretty handy, I'll tell ye," Mr. Willey said.

"Wrapped up good, grandma?"

"Oh, yes, I know how to bundle." Her voice came muffled through the fascinator that she had wound around her head over a knitted hood. She stepped along blindly behind George, down the covered walk, squinting against the misty flakes, trying to keep hold of the coarse brown hair of George's fur coat . . . feet making soft cavernous dents in the thick snow . . . "Why, there's Reverend and Mrs. Baxter in the bob, ain't it?"

"Yeah, they're going along with us. Can yuh get in, grandma?"

George lifted her over the side of the bob, and with a little scramble she managed to get in. The Methodist minister and his wife were tucked snugly into a corner. Mr. Baxter shouted jovial greetings. Mrs. Baxter smiled and nodded, only glints of eyes showing between squinted eyelids, two little hard red cheeks and a ruddy blob of nose let out of the big scarf tied over her head.

"Get in. Lots of room."

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Four ministerial feet in heavy, shining rubbers were hitched awkwardly over the thick robe covering the floor of the bob, through little holes of which stuck bent yellow straws. The old people squatted down stiffly, and Mr. Baxter drew the fur robe over them.

"Well, how's the wedding party?"

"Oh . . . I guess they're all right," Mrs. Willey said with shy pleasure.

"Looks more like a silver wedding than a golden wedding today."

"Yes, ain't the snow bad?"

"All fixed back there?" George called.

"All fixed! Let 'er go!"

"*Gid*-dap!"

The two big horses gave a plunge forward, the bob rocked, tilted up on the edge of the road. . . . They passed the snowy willows and got out on the main road, where there were already silvery-smooth bob tracks above the gravel, no ruts to make the women give little shrieks and put out their hands blindly. The horses settled into an even trot.

"Isn't this nice, though?" Mrs. Baxter exulted.

All felt the exhilaration. The strangeness of the snow made the day a festival.

They stopped trying to shout things at one another, getting the wet small flakes in their mouths. They snuggled down on the straw under the fur robe. The bob went softly through the new, pure whiteness. Snow kept falling, gentle as mist—tiny flakes, and big tufted splotches. The road ahead and the road behind were lost—there was only a place of dim white silence, and they moving in it.

"Are we there?"

"Why, I guess we are!"

"I didn't hardly know where we're getting."

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The bob trundled over the wooden planks across the ditch and into the drive between the willow-trees that were blue-brown through the snow . . . misty, dream-like, strange. The place had a festive air, too, because of the magic difference the snow made—the big barn roof white against the shrouded sky; the old wagon standing out there softly covered, rounded, all its stark angles gone.

"Well, I guess I didn't spill anybody out," George said.

They plodded to the house. George had let them out near the back door. They went up the steps, with a great stamping and scuffing—Clara in the doorway urging them in, they protesting that they must "sweep themselves off."

"Aw, it's just the kitchen—won't hurt this floor—come on in."

They went in, brushing and shaking. At once they were enveloped in warmth from the big range, with scents of chicken browning, biscuits, coffee, that their nostrils breathed in with a sharp deliciousness . . . snow melting on their wraps, shaking off in a fine chill spray, making pools on the linoleum. They had a glimpse of Darlene, the youngest girl, at the stove, her face flushed a deep hot rose under the brown hair. Many dishes about. . . .

"Oh, don't stay in here!" Clara was urging. "No, your things won't hurt anything. Ain't the first time there's been snow in this house today."

Mrs. Baxter and Mrs. Willey found themselves pushed into the chilly downstairs bedroom, where they unwrapped scarfs and fascinators, and where Mrs. Baxter—with apology and an alert glance at the door—yanked up her skirt and revealed black woolen tights which she tugged off her portly legs.

"Didn't know but what the snow might get in," she panted. "So I thought I'd come prepared. I guess I won't

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shock you ladies getting these off—hope none of the men'll look in here—might see a sight—"

"They ain't around," Clara said comfortingly. "That's just all right—just the thing to wear."

Clara stood until the wraps were off. She was heated, so that her grayish-brown hair looked dry and sheeny above her flushed face. She wore a bungalow apron. And yet she looked festive, too. Extra clean, her mother thought, with her fat arms bare to the elbow, her perspiring neck.

"Well, if you've got everything you want—"

"Oh, yes! Don't pay any attention to us, Clara. I'll come out and help you just as soon as I get my things off."

"No, now, ma. You go in the parlor and visit with Mrs. Baxter. I don't want either of you in the kitchen. Minnie'll help me."

"Oh, is Minnie and John here?"

"Yes, they're here. Minnie's here and the rest are coming."

"Well, I guess we'll have to obey," Mrs. Willey said with a pleased flattered laugh.

They went into the parlor and seated themselves nicely. Mrs. Willey bent down to pick off a tiny straw clinging to her gray silk dress. Then she folded her hands and rocked.

She had half expected all along to find people here. And she saw no one but Clara and Darlene, and her daughter-in-law Minnie, who peeped in a moment. But the minister's family being here made it all right to have worn the gray silk—justified her in having ordered the necktie. Mrs. Baxter had on a dark-blue taffeta that rustled as she rocked.

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All the same, the old lady could sense an air of preparation. The odors in the kitchen, that quick, half-realized glimpse of dishes . . . Even the bedroom had been specially clean; a glossy white scarf on the dresser and the tatting-edged pillow shams. Clara had her best things out. The dining-room door was closed. Yes, and in the parlor too the chairs were set so neatly. The perfect order of the mission table suggested something beyond the everyday. As they rocked, Mrs. Willey was alert for every sound. There was a shrill excited tone in the noise and laughter in the kitchen, abruptly stilled, and then breaking out again; a tramping, a going back and forth that suggested more people in the house than were apparent; children's voices in some upstairs room.

The realization of the occasion brought back heightened memories. As she looked about the parlor, with its new Victrola and davenport and miscellaneous chairs, Mrs. Willey was on the point of saying to Mrs. Baxter: "This don't look much the way the place did when Mister and I first came here!" But she could not communicate that poignant memory of the old rooms, that was somewhere deep in her mind . . . small, bare, the few walnut furnishings, the feeling of raw openness all around. . . . She rocked. Her eyes had a distant look.

She was excited by the scents from the kitchen, the subdued bustle there.

Shouts came from outside. Mrs. Willey turned quickly to the window—the shouts an answer to her expectation.

A great bob load was coming up to the house, rocking as it turned into the drive—people shouting, waving. Mrs. Willey's hands felt trembling, her heart beat sharply, as she rose. The two old people stood blinking, she gratified, he sheepish, as a confused lot of people came tramping in, and crying:

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"Where's the bridal couple? Look at the blushing groom! Well, well, well—many happy returns of the day!"

III

The dining-room door opened—

"Go in, ma."

"Yes, the bridal couple must lead the way."

The old people protested, as a matter of duty, but inwardly pleased to be pushed in ahead of the others, to sit at the head of the long table. Old Mr. Willey looked sheepish—all this splendor for an old couple like them. But Mrs. Willey was exalted. She saw the room in a heightened dazzle of bright confusion—glitter of tumblers, plates and silver, shine of white and yellow. Laughing, calling, appreciative murmurs . . . and then all of them standing there, suddenly and uncomfortably grave, Mrs. Willey still tremulous with excitement, while the minister gave the blessing, appropriately solemn and loud-toned . . . only one high, unconscious piping from the children's table in the corner.

The company seated themselves. The laughter, the murmurs broke out again.

"My, isn't this lovely!"

"Well, grandma, what do you think of it?"

"Well, I . . . I don't hardly know *what* to say," the old lady quavered.

The others laughed delightedly.

But as she sat at the head of the table, waited upon, getting served first, gradually things began to emerge out of that first shining confusion. She had known that this would happen, marvelous as it was. She recognized her daughter-in-law Minnie's best table-cloth, pieced out at the farther end (where George sat) with one of Clara's—that table-cloth with a crocheted border, that had been

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laid away in a chiffonier drawer to be peeped at by admiring women, that had been used only at the weddings of Minnie's daughters. The granddaughters must have brought their best wedding silver in carefully packed baskets. Clara and George had never accumulated any silver. But even more thrilling than this was the festive look of the room, with its decorations—the yellow crêpe paper drawn from the center-piece and tied in bows at the four corners, the yellow tissue paper flowers (Gertrude was the one who had made those) at every place . . . and all the decorations converging significantly toward the center of the table where a huge cake frosted in yellow, frilled about with paper and flowers, stood under a hanging, ruffly, yellow wedding bell.

She looked about the long, crowded table. They were all there—all the people whose lives were bound up with hers and pa's. Clara and George, Minnie and John, grandsons and grandsons-in-law, "connexions" from Prospect and the country around; even Nels Olson, a prosperous merchant in town now, but years ago the Willeys' hired man. The children at the square table were gleeful, and in their best.

And it was for them—for her and pa. She felt that exalted swelling in her breast, and tears stayed just behind the surface glisten of her eyes. Let pa say again that they were old and left behind, that no one thought of them, their day was over! No, this occasion was as glorious as she had been imagining it, in spite of his pessimistic objections. After all these work-filled years—fifty years—that had seemed at times to be petering out into a small meager loneliness, to sit here, honored, receiving again the delicious food and wine of personal recognition. All her people met to do her honor, to show that her life-work had counted. . . . There was just one little twinge

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of disappointment. Robert had not come from Seattle. She had thought against all reason that when she opened the door, she would miraculously find Robert. She was glad she had mentioned it to no one. Pa's scoffing would have been justified.

It showed the grandeur of the occasion that Clara was "sitting down to table" beside George; although she gave hasty uneasy glances toward the kitchen. She had changed her apron, at the last minute, for her best dark green taffeta, above which her fat neck and face were flushed hotly. The granddaughters were waiting on the table, squeezing in between the chairs and the wall with their great platters of fowl, and bowls of gravy, and shining coffee-pot. The meal was like an old-time harvest dinner in abundance—besides the chicken, two big platters of goose that Minnie had cooked at home and brought over warm, and covered, to be heated in Clara's oven; potatoes, baked beans, escalloped corn and peas, three kinds of bread and biscuits, relishes and jellies and pickles. But there were, besides, the special dishes that marked the importance of wedding and reunion dinners in Prospect and the country around—perfection salad, made the day before by the married granddaughters, great biscuit pans full of it; mayonnaise; and the women guests at the table had already discerned that the huge, yellow-frosted cake was Golden Companion, for which Lottie Disbrow had the community recipe.

The first absorption in food was giving way to a chatter. The children at the small table were yielding pieces of chicken that they had snatched, consenting to wait for "something *awful* good" promised by mothers in a deep whisper. Faces shone and glistened with warmth and food . . . and past the window-panes drifted the last aimless flakes of the big snowfall.

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There were satisfied, admiring comments on the food. . . . "Ain't these biscuits just fine! You make these, Clara?" "Yes. I was afraid they wasn't going to come out good." "Oh, they're lovely!" . . . "More chicken? Well, sir, I've had a good deal already. Do you let folks have their third piece?" A worried "Oh, now, Henry, you want to be careful. You've had enough." "Aw, go on and take it, Reverend. You need that drumstick."

John said expansively: "Don't pay any attention to the womenfolks! This is the time when a fellow can eat all he pleases. Can't have a golden-wedding dinner every day."

"Yes, but then you'll expect your wives to run around for you maybe half the night because you eat too much again," Minnie put in smartly.

All the wives murmured: "I guess so!" And laughed significantly.

But the men said: "Time enough to worry about that afterwards. Anyway, I can't see but you're eatin' plenty yourself."

Talk, clatter of dishes, shrill voices of children, babies waking and wailing in the bedroom. Mrs. Baxter said: "It seems a shame to eat, and spoil this lovely table." But it was spoiled now—littered—the hand-painted jelly dishes messy, the salad bowls nearly empty, some of the crêpe paper torn and pushed askew. The dinner was ending. The girls brought heaping dishes of home-made ice cream with chocolate sauce.

"Oh, my! Look at this! I don't know where the room for it's coming from, but I'll have to find some."

Mr. Willey muttered: "What's this stuff on here?"

Mrs. Willey nudged him. "Pa! That's choc'late."

"Huh! Well, I dunno—"

"You rather have yours without, grandpa?"

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"No, no!" Mrs. Willey protested, shocked. "He'll eat it this way. It looks lovely." She gave him a look.

The women perceived—felt in the air—what was about to come. But some of the men took up their spoons, began to eat, were reprimanded by their wives, and looked about, belligerent and then subdued. Mrs. Willey knew what it meant. Her small, faded mouth quivered. Clara was getting ready, half apologetic, to make the people listen. Gertrude stood behind her grandmother's chair, smiling.

"Sh! Sh!"

Clara got up with difficulty, squeezed between the table and her chair. Her voice had the toneless quavering of one unaccustomed and half ashamed to speak before others.

"Friends . . . and—a . . . As long as this is our mother's and father's golden-wedding day, maybe now we better ask mother to cut the wedding cake."

Mr. Baxter relieved the silent moment that followed by a loud, cheerful "That's right—let the bride do it." There were repetitions of "bride"; and they all laughed and murmured. Gertrude handed her grandmother the large knife; and the old lady, her hands trembling slightly, cut through the Golden Companion. The first wedge came out, moist, rich and yellow. They applauded. There were shouts of laughter when Mr. Baxter found the old maid's thimble in his piece. Lottie Disbrow had marked the location of the ring, and Gertrude gave that piece to her grandmother.

"I'm gonna be rich—look, mamma, I'm gonna be rich!" one of the children cried, holding up the coin.

The wedding cake was passed about the table. The groom's cake—a dark, spicy fruit cake—was brought in already cut. Plates of angel food were passed about—"Better eat this, girls," the women told the unmarried girls, "and save your wedding cake to sleep on!" Now all

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the table relaxed into a warm, easy, chattering exhilaration. Even old Mr. Willey had dropped his defenses, carried along by the spirit of the hour.

How did every one feel it now? But those still talking relapsed into startled silence. Throat-clearings. The men looked down, rigid, embarrassed. The children turned with round, bright, fascinated eyes. Mrs. Willey's heart pounded. Clara's eyes began to water.

The Reverend Mr. Baxter rose, tapped on his glass with his knife.

"Sh—sh!" to the children.

Silence.

Mr. Baxter began to speak. Although he spoke in the slow, portentous voice that he used for the texts of his sermons, only significant phrases stood out, echoed and diminished in the minds of the listeners . . . "met together today . . . do honor to these two people . . . long journey together . . . achievement . . . God's blessing on this couple . . ." Words irradiated by the winter sunshine that came through the windows now, sparkling off the snow, and striking iridescence from the silver and glass, the glossy table-cloth, the warm shining heads of the listening children. The old couple at the head of the table took on a deep significance into which a lifetime of meaning was compressed, brought to a sudden realization. . . . "And now I have been asked by all these good people to present this token of the occasion. And may it always bring to your minds, Mr. and Mrs. Willey, the memory of the affection of your children and neighbors, and their appreciation of your having reached this day."

He took the package that Gertrude handed him. Old Mr. Willey had to receive it—unwrap it—show to every one the silver loving-cup. There were applause, hand-clap-

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pings, nose-blowings. A telegram from Robert was read. The sun shone warmly on the silver cup with its gilt lining, flashed off the two handles. The old lady could only murmur that she "thanked her dear children and neighbors." But the old man was flushed, carried beyond himself. He saw everything heightened . . . and his vision, like his wife's, stretched back and back to scenes so long ago that he scarcely knew how to communicate his sense of them. But he had to say something if she didn't.

He remembered when he first came out to Ioway, he said. The bob ride had brought back old times. Things that the children had thought old stuff, the tales that old men tell sitting on benches in front of the hotel—they listened to now with a sense of drama and event, of time passing. When he talked about the wedding day fifty years ago, the children heard him with delighted appreciation.

"In them days, we didn't go to all this fuss we do now for weddings. When folks wanted to git married, they just hitched up and drove into town, and that ended it. Well, sir, I was thinking what kind of a day that was. Not snowy—one of them real muddy days—and I tell ye, there was *mud* in those times! You fellers talk about roads, but you don't know what roads can be. Well, sir, we'd fixed on that day—and I was willing to put it off—but *she'd* got her mind set on it and of course it had to be. ["Asa!" Applause from the men, protests from the women.] We took my brother Luke's team, and him and me and her and Luke's girl—girl he had then, name of Tressy Bowers, she went out to Dakoty later—we started, with the horses all slicked up and their manes combed out, to drive into Prospect. Well, good enough goin' for a ways—and then jest out here beyond where Ted Bloomquist's place is now, we run into one of them mudholes about three foot deep.

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Mud splashes up—girls screeches—and them two horses gits stuck so they can't pull out. Well, then the womenfolks had a time! They don't want us to git out in the mud because it'll spoil our wedding clothes, and they ain't nothing else for us to do but set there until somebody comes along. Well, a fellow did, and he helped us, and we got out.

"But then me and Luke's about as muddy as the team, and the women thought it was awful to go into town to the preacher's that way. So before we reached town—right down there by the crick, in what's Hibbert's pasture now—they made us fellers git out; and the girls they took sticks and whatever they could find handy, and tore a big chunk out o' their underskirts—women wore plenty o' clothes them days—and they made us fellers stand up and hev the mud scraped off our pants—and then when we's cleaned up a little, we went along to the preacher's and got married."

"And it's lasted quite a while!"

"Yes, sir. He done a good job of it."

Mrs. Willey was flustered, protesting—"You know it wasn't near as bad as that! What do you want to go and tell such things for?"—blushing when the underskirts were mentioned. In the warm, relieved, easy glow that followed, the loving-cup was passed about the table and admired. The names of all the givers were engraved upon it; and beneath the names of Asa Willey and Angie Pilgrim Willey, the two dates: 1874-1924.

Finally it was time to leave the table. The granddaughters would not let the older women into the kitchen. Carrie Gustafson had been called to help out with the dishwashing. The others went into the parlor, all the women urging one another to take the best rockers; looking out of the windows and commenting that the day had

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"turned out nice" after all. They were moving still in that warm, easy exhilaration that came from food and coffee and that high moment at the table. "Tired, grandma?" "Oh, no, I ain't tired." The sun glistened on the snow. Mrs. Willey sat in an ease in which it seemed that she could never know what fatigue was—strangely free, her spirit exulting, doing what it pleased with her body. The great dinner was over, but the day was not ended yet. There were things to come. And then there would be the afterglow lingering for a long, long time.

"Guess we'll have a little music, folks," George said.

They listened, sentimentally gratified, when a mellifluous barytone with an overdone accent sang *Silver Threads Among the Gold*. But the murmuring and chatter, the pleas and shouts of children, sounded above the music—George's few "good" records, conscientiously played: *Il Trovatore, A Perfect Day, The Last Rose of Summer*. George began to yield to the children's pleas for "This one, grandpa," "Play this one, Uncle George"—*Morning in the Barnyard* and the "Uncle Josh" monologue. The room was filled with a high noise of chatter, laughter, resolute music, sounds from the kitchen . . . and outside, the sun sparkling off the great, untouched spread of snow across the yard and fields.

Shouts from the road, and then a running to the windows. Charlie, one of George's boys, came tramping into the house, ruddy-faced, in his sheepskin coat . . . from somewhere a jingle of sleigh-bells. The girls followed him from the kitchen, dish towels in their hands.

"Well, grandma and grandpa, do you want a sleigh-ride? Team's out here ready."

The others urged, laughing, excited, pushing toward the dining-room windows from which—through a blinding sparkle—they could see the sleigh. The young men

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were out there, patting the horses. They had got the Tomlinsons' old two-seated sleigh, that had been packed away in a musty, cluttered barn corner for years. It was furbished, decked with sleigh-bells the boys had found somewhere; John's big horses stamping, shaking and turning their heads to see where the jingling came from, letting out clouds of silvery vapor.

"It ain't cold—just grand! Better go, grandma."

"Take your wedding journey!"

The bedroom was full of women laughing, encouraging, helping to bundle her into heavy wraps—shouting to George to get his fur coat for grandpa. There was discussion as to who should have the place beside Charlie. "You go, Clara." "Oh, no—some of the rest of you." "Mr. and Mrs. Baxter—" "Oh, no, no! Let some of these little people." "Me, mamma! I want a sleigh-ride!" "No, you children can have lots of fun here." "I think Clara'd ought to go. She's the only one ain't had a ride today." Clara would not go without Minnie. The two plump women were packed into the front seat, with Charlie squeezed between them. The old Willeys had the place of honor in the back of the sleigh.

All the company flung on wraps, shawls, whatever they could pick up, and hurried out to the back steps to watch the sleighing party leave. The women hugged their arms in their shawls, squinted against the sharp flash of sun from the drive and glistening shed roofs.

"Look-a there! Ain't that great?"

They pointed to the placard that the boys had fastened with a white streamer to the back of the sleigh—JUST MARRIED.

"Get back—get those kids back. These horses are rarin' to go."

The clustered company waved, shouted, as the sleigh

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started with a jerk and frosty jingle of bells; watched it out of sight around the turn; then went back to the house, away from the white emptiness in which the new sleigh-tracks had left steely marks.

Bobs had been along this road since it had stopped snowing, making the going easier. The jingling bells, the sky a dazzle of blue after the snowfall. . . . The world they were passing through was as shining, remote, as those ethereal, silvery hills and thickets drawn on frosty window-panes. The sunlight glittered on the horses' smooth-curving backs. The sleigh runners left narrow, hard, flashing tracks. The low rounded hills were crusted deep with sparkling white. Corn stalks, humped with snow, shone stiff and pale gold. They had to close their eyes against that blinding radiance.

They drove into Prospect—not down that little street where the old people lived, but "right through the main part of town." People halted at the sound of bells, laughed at the placard, waved and called out greetings. The sleighing party, warmed still by the happy intoxication of the wedding dinner, responded hilariously.

"What's this—an elopement?" Judge Brubaker shouted.

"We've got to stop for you to have your pictures taken," Clara turned to say.

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Willey protested.

But she liked it—even grandpa liked it.

They climbed the sloping wooden stairs to the gallery, covered with thick soft snow. The photograph would be in the Des Moines paper. "Prospect Couple Celebrate Golden Wedding." It would have their names—tell about the loving-cup and Robert's telegram. The long room of the gallery, filled with snowy light, had the same dazzle as the street today.

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The old man was lifted above his gloom and forebodings. He raised his wife's hand clasped in his, and shouted back at people. A crowd of little boys swarmed out into the road, making for the sleigh with ludicrous determination. "Hop on, boys!" he called jovially. They clung until a jerk at the corner threw them off the runners; and they still trailed the sleigh for a block or two.

IV

"Well, was the ride nice, grandma?"

"Oh, it was fine!"

"Get cold?"

"Not a bit cold. . . . I guess I am a little chilly now, though."

And as she trudged up through the heavy snow to the farm-house again, she realized that the afternoon was late, the best of the sunshine over. When she went into the house, too, there was a different feeling. The big bob-load of people had left during the sleigh-ride. Now there were only the family themselves—the granddaughters sitting wearily in the parlor after their long siege in the kitchen. "Oh, children, be still awhile. You make such a racket." Carrie Gustafson was plodding about in the kitchen doing the last of the cleaning up.

Standing in the bedroom, taking off her many wraps, Mrs. Willey realized that the chill of the winter day had sunk into her. Her eyes were reddened, her small faded lips were blue. Her thin frail hands felt stiff and chilled.

"I guess you did get kind o' cold, grandma."

"Oh, not so very. It was awful nice."

They sat about in the parlor, where the grandchildren were playing with undiminished liveliness, even wilder than at noon. The older people were tired. The men talked, and the women, in two camps. Then some of the women

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went out to the kitchen to "set out a few things for supper."

"Now, don't go to a lot of trouble. We don't really need a thing after all we've et."

"Oh, the men'll want something. We'll just put on what's left."

But when they went to the table, the cold goose and chicken, the warmed-over potatoes, the different bits of salad, tasted good after all. There was a revived cheer, an intimacy in gathering around the remnants of the great meal after the outsiders had left. The glossy tablecloth had spots of jelly. The yellow bell still hung there; but the flowers and crêpe paper and wedding cake were gone. Plates of angel food and fruit cake, a little crumbled, were put on. The coffee tasted better than anything else.

Under the old woman's smile lay tremulous fatigue. She could scarcely sit at the table. As soon as the meal was over, George hitched up the bob to take the old people and some of the grandchildren home.

"Well, sir, it's been quite a day!"

Now they had seen too much to notice the whiteness of the fields that they passed, the willows dim and motionless. The straw was warm under the robe on the floor of the bob. The *plop-plop-plop* of the big horses' hoofs was magically soothing . . . and the slight jolt and sway of the bob, going over rough places in the road, turning corners. . . .

They were all surprised when the bob stopped.

"Are we here?"

"Sure. Where'd you think we was?"

"Why, I didn't hardly know."

"Wait a minute, grandma, I'll lift you out."

George lifted her over the side of the bob. When he

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put her down, her legs felt stiff and queer, and she could scarcely make her feet move. She looked with a kind of wonder at the house standing bleak, silent, no shine from the windows, no smoke from the chimney. She entered it with the feeling of a traveler from splendid scenes who still carries a trace of their radiance with him to shed upon the familiar home. The little entry was cold.

"Wait a minute," George said. "I'll get your fire going for you."

"Oh, you needn't to bother, George."

"Sure. Only take a minute."

The sound of his heavy boots, the crackle of wood and rattle of coal, made a cheerful bustle. "There! I guess she'll warm up now." Then he was gone. Shouts of good-bye from the bob—it trundled off down the snowy street, around a corner.

It seemed as if the day could not be over. But they were in the house together. There was nothing for them to do, after all, but to go to bed.

V

Their bedroom was chilly.

It took the old woman longer to put away all her cherished best things—her silk dress and lace collar and brooch. He was in bed long before she was, and impatient. She wanted to linger. The silk dress kept the feeling of occasion. There was still a sense of exaltation—a jumbled memory of the dinner, the shining table, the jangle of bells and the sparkling snow, the greetings along the street.

But the old pieces of furniture, set with a meager exactness in the chilly room, exerted the long-known influence of the everyday. After all, it was this that they must come back to. The day had been fine, but the day was over

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and would not come again. Now, when they were alone, they had so little to say. Their room was too close, too familiar. Their knowledge of each other was too intimate for their speech to go outside its daily boundaries—they were afraid of that. They fell so quickly into the old ways with each other. She struggled against admitting this. "The cake was nice, wa'n't it?"

"Hm?"

"The cake. It was nice."

"Um. Yeah. Ain't you nearly ready?"

"It was nice of the children to plan it for us that way, a surprise like that."

. . . But it was no use. He would never talk about things. He was pulling her down to the old level again. She folded away the lace collar, put the brooch in the small jeweler's box with her watch chain and an old ring. She would have liked to go over the whole day, picking out and holding up the intimate and significant details—but he wanted the light out, wanted to get to sleep. She was softened toward him, thinking of that moment on the snowy street when he had lifted their two hands. She was not ready to let the day go. Why couldn't pa ever talk things over with her? He'd talk more to anybody than to her.

She felt the still, frosty wonder of the night, as she stood a moment at the small window. And because she could not share this—felt so helpless—a little old, thin bitterness seeped through her proud exaltation, tincturing it with the familiar quality of every day. . . .

He turned over restlessly. "Well, ma! Ain't ye ever comin' to bed?"

"Well, can't you give me time to put away my things?"

"Hmp . . . 'time'!" And other mutterings, half intelligible.

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But when she put out the light and climbed into the creaking bed beside him, he was at ease. He soon went to sleep. She lay beside him, awake for a long time.

The irritation died away into calm, and she lay holding in the solitude of her own mind deeply felt, wordless things . . . as she had done in countless other nights; holding quiet both the beauty and the bitterness, encompassing them in the tranquillity of her comprehension . . . not so ill content, after all, that he should drop off childlike to sleep, and leave her and those incommunicable thoughts alone.

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